

if you can find a way to love me, it's all right
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by [varnes](#)

Summary

When Ryan was a kid, he fell into a pile of bricks. They were playing hide and seek, and he thought he had the best hiding spot: high up in a thickly lush tree, his knees drawn to his chest so that he'd blend in. But the branch broke. He hit his head and doesn't remember much of what happened after that. When he woke up a few hours later, the sun was setting, and his friends were gone, and his parents were calling for him, their flashlights swinging across the grass. There'd been blood on his bangs.

Anyway, now he can see ghosts.

Kind of.

Look, he's not great at it.

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Or: Ryan, personally, has three lists: "NICE GHOSTS," "GHOSTS I DON'T FUCK WITH," and, "IDK, SPOOKY STUFF."

Notes

i love 2 ghouls boys. this one swung into sliiiiightly more serious territory than i really meant it to, but whatever. sometimes that's just how it goes, babes. anyway, come find me on [tumblr](#).

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

When Ryan was a kid, he fell into a pile of bricks. They were playing hide and seek, and he thought he had the best hiding spot: high up in a thickly lush tree, his knees drawn to his chest so that he'd blend in. But the branch broke. He hit his head and doesn't remember much of what happened after that. When he woke up a few hours later, the sun was setting, and his friends were gone, and his parents were calling for him, their flashlights swinging across the grass. There'd been blood on his bangs.

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Kind of.

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It's not all the time, and it's not like *The Sixth Sense*. Ghosts don't look like people; they don't really look like anything. Ryan will go for months without seeing anything and all, and then when he does, it's just something flickering in and out of the corner of his eyes. It doesn't look human, or even *humanoid*, really. It's more like the air gets thick and takes a shape.

Ryan, personally, has three lists: "NICE GHOSTS," "GHOSTS I DON'T FUCK WITH," and, "IDK, SPOOKY STUFF."

Nice ghosts are Ryan's favorite, because they're pretty chill, and don't ask for anything too complicated. Well -- they don't really *ask* for anything at all; they can't talk, exactly, but they can kind of send vague impressions of things, cats and old ladies and once, memorably, a Fabergé egg. It's part of why he started using the spirit box -- to make it easier, maybe.

Ryan might not always get the nuance of what nice ghosts tell him, but he gets the *gist*, you know? Like, oh, my family lost their fancy egg and I'm sad about it, oh I was a shitty son, oh I had a cat and now that I'm dead I'm worried no one will feed Mr. Whiskers.

He does his best to help, when he can. He can't launch a manhunt for a lost Fabergé egg or whatever, but like, he has a cat now, and Ryan doesn't even really *like* cats.

Ghosts that Ryan doesn't fuck with are the reason he won't ever go back to the Queen Mary or the Sallie House. They're like a shadow

moving, too-fast and in patterns that don't make sense. It's only ever in the dark, shadows where shadows shouldn't be, shadows where there isn't any light to block. They're flat, they vibrate, they reach, and the air around them gets thick with whatever malice is drowning them.

Ryan has never been able to figure out what the fuck they want, and even if he could, he probably wouldn't help them, because fuck those guys.

The spooky stuff is ... well, he thinks it's kind of like possession. It's not always obvious to Ryan that they *are* ghosts, in the moment; he'll have a conversation with someone in a grocery store and only later will it strike him that they'd been moving oddly, like their body was new and they weren't used to it, and that it was weird that they were telling him about how they never told their mother that they loved her.

Ryan had been like, "Uh ... yeah ... maybe you could call her?" and then run away. It wasn't till he'd gotten back to the house that he realized that probably it was a ghost who wanted *Ryan* to do it, but like, Ryan couldn't call some random lady and tell her that her newly dead kid loved her, that was fucked up. That's how people got arrested.

It's terrifying, but it's also -- there's something electrifying in it, in the way his hair stands up, in the way he feels *chosen*. They came to *him*. Not to anybody else, or at least, not to *everybody* else. The vague ones, the possession ones, even the terrifying ones: it's *Ryan* they decided to reveal themselves to.

The ghosts *picked* him. He's not gonna just *ignore* them.

--

"The fuck, Mr. Whiskers," Ryan grumbles, scrubbing at his eyes. "C'mon, man. It's like two in the morning."

Mr. Whiskers blinks at him, slow and thoughtful. Honestly, Ryan is like 80% sure that Mr. Whiskers has a ghost in him, but he's never asked Ryan for help or anything. He just -- talks to him, kind of, in that ghostly way.

He's sitting on Ryan's chest now, swishing his tail back and forth and kneading him expectantly. Ryan raises his head and looks around the room, but he doesn't see anything, and doesn't get any impressions.

They're leaving for a shoot in Chicago today, in just a handful of hours, and Ryan had hoped to get plenty of sleep before the flight because he has a hard time sleeping on planes. But Mr. Whiskers seems uninterested in letting him sleep, and every time Ryan's eyes close he kneads him a little harder, with his nails.

"What," Ryan asks. "We've talked about this, man. You've gotta be more direct. It's too early for me to guess." He gets a vision of the Taco Bell around the block. He sighs. "Now? Dude, we can't keep doing this. You have a problem."

He pushes up onto his elbows and casts around for his phone, patting his mattress until he finds it in the blanket folds. It's later than he'd thought, almost five. He has an unread text from Shane from before he went to sleep: *CHICAGO, BABYYYY*.

chicago, baby, Ryan texts back. He gets up out of bed, stretching, and looks down at Mr. Whiskers. "Do you feel really strongly about this?" he asks. "Like -- *really* strongly? Because I'd love to not make a fucking Taco Bell run before having to go to the airport."

Mr. Whiskers meows at him. Ryan gets the vision again.

His phone goes off. Shane. *you're up early*.

YOU'RE up early.

CHICAGO, BABYYYYYYY!!!

Ryan laughs, pulls on his glasses and some jeans, and grabs his wallet. "I'm only doing this because I'm about to abandon you for a few days," he tells Mr. Whiskers sternly. "But when I get back, we're going to set some guidelines, okay? Or like, meal times at least."

Mr. Whiskers lays down and licks his paws, unconcerned. Ryan scrubs his hand over his eyes and sighs. Fine. He could use some coffee, anyway.

getting coffee, want anything from taco bell??

He picks up his phone when Shane replies with a call. "Why are you getting coffee from Taco Bell?"

"They make good coffee," Ryan lies, because *my cat wants a taco* sounds crazy. "And it's close to my house. And I like Taco Bell, whatever dude, do you want something or not?"

“You have strange passions, Ryan Bergara,” Shane tells him. “But yeah, get me a coffee. And a taco. Actually, two tacos. The breakfast ones.”

“The Naked Egg?”

“Stark naked. Nakey nakey, eggs and bakey.”

“You want guacamole and the spicy sauce?”

“No, I want some rubbery eggs with no flavor and no avocados. What kind of question is that?”

“I dunno, man, you’re from the Midwest. I know you guys can’t eat anything hotter than ketchup without crying.”

Shane laughs. “You never give me compliments anymore,” he laments. “The romance is dead. You’ve lost that lovin’ feelin’.”

“I’m buying you breakfast!” Ryan protests, pulling into the drive-thru. “Spontaneously! Come on, that’s romantic. It shows I’m thinking of you. And that I’m a provider.”

He regrets the words as soon as he’s said them, too-aware of how sleepy and sincere he sounds. But he’s working on not over-correcting when he says something embarrassing, and on stamping down the little voice in the back of his head saying *gaaaaaaay* in a sing-song voice that sounds like the president of his fraternity. So instead of following it up (*that sounded like we’re a couple, we’re not a couple*), he just orders Shane’s and Mr. Whiskers’ tacos and two coffees.

Shane seems unperturbed by Ryan’s accidental show of devotion; he’s moved on to narrating his plans for the Chicago stuff they’re gonna do, “you know, after we don’t find any ghosts.”

Ryan rolls his eyes. “The skeptic cannot see because his eyes are closed,” he quotes. “But that does not mean the world is dark around him.”

“So quoth poet laureate Ryan Bergara,” Shane laughs. “That was beautiful. I’m moved. Ghosts are still bullshit, but I’m really moved.”

“You’re bullshit,” Ryan grumbles back, too tired to be clever anymore. “I’ve got your tacos, dickface. I’ll see you soon.”

“Chicago, baby!” Shane cries, and Ryan hangs up.

When he gets home, he puts Mr. Whiskers' tacos in his kitty food bowl. They kind of fall apart, but whatever, he's a fucking cat.

"This is the *last time*," Ryan tells him. Mr. Whiskers sends him a vision of an emoji shrug.

Ryan's cat is an asshole.

They are going to the Congress Hotel. There are a ton of haunted places in Chicago -- "*allegedly* haunted," Shane says -- but this was the one that had caught Ryan's attention. He tries to pick places that he gets, like, a psychic *vibe* from, or whatever; not that it's been a particularly successful method, given that they've yet to really find anything.

He's *pretty fucking sure* that he saw that little boy kick the ball in Waverly, but there's no point in telling Shane that. Ryan's definitely not gonna go on camera saying he's a psychic. He's comfortable admitting that he believes, but there's a wide line between "Ryan Bergara believes in ghosts" and "Ryan Bergara believes he can talk to ghosts." One of those Ryan Bergaras is a funny, quirky BuzzFeed employee, and the other one is a headcase.

And like, Ryan knows that he sees what he sees, but if someone told *him* they could see, whatever, angels or something, yeah. He'd think they were out of their fucking gourd.

And Shane -- Shane would look at Ryan like --

Well, Shane wouldn't believe him. That's all.

Anyway, the Congress had caught Ryan's attention for the sheer number of crazy shit that people reported seeing there, and that one Australian chef that had run out of it in 2014 without even bothering to check out. Some guy named Peg Leg Johnny, and something ominously called the Shadow Man. One of the top TripAdvisor reviews was just titled "Haunted & Terrible," which was, frankly, Ryan's *exact shit*.

Also, there are a bunch of ghosts that will be great for an ep, including one named Disco Man. Ryan can hear the funky music jump cut already. Ryan has committed to staying in room 441, supposedly the most haunted in the whole place; rumor has it that Stephen King based *1408* on the hotel, but Ryan hasn't been able to confirm it

outside of one article by Ursula Bielski, and it kind of seems like she made it up wholesale. Ryan's gonna have to do some more research on it. He kind of wonders whether he's got enough journalistic influence now that he could get Stephen King to reply to an email.

Probably not. Ryan kind of doubts that Stephen King is into BuzzFeed.

"Spooky," Shane says dryly as they walk into the lobby, which is huge and ornate and admittedly doesn't scream 'ghosts.' "Oh look, they have cucumber water. Do you think it's haunted, Ryan, or is it safe to drink?"

There is actually a ghost coalescing by the table with the pitcher of cucumber on it, but it seems harmless, and Shane's being irritating, so Ryan doesn't say anything. "I hope you choke on the cucumbers," he says without looking up from his phone. "Then you can come back as a ghost and I can make fun of you for being wrong about ghosts and also dying by choking on cucumber slices."

"It hurts me when you say these things, Ryan," Shane says, suddenly very close behind him, close enough that Ryan can feel his breath on his ear. "You'd miss me if I was dead. You wouldn't have anyone to do *Unsolved* with you."

"I could get Brent back," Ryan jokes, ignoring the twinge in his chest at the idea of doing *Unsolved* without Shane. "At least then I wouldn't have to sit through the fucking *Hotdaga*."

"You love the *Hotdaga*."

"I don't."

He doesn't, actually. It's a nightmare to animate, and he honestly doesn't find the story that compelling. But he likes how much Shane puts into it; he likes all the hours he spends writing the songs and going through Ryan's VO files to put together dialogue for Dr. Gundis. It makes *Unsolved* feel a little more shared, a little more like it's not just Ryan's baby that Shane is helping out with.

They get their room key and go in to set up; the rest of the crew has their own, presumably less-haunted rooms, so they make a plan to reconvene in half an hour to film the preliminary stuff.

Shane is bouncing on the balls of his feet, excited in an energetic way that he usually isn't. It's not that Shane is never stressed, Ryan knows, it's just that his stress is pretty cerebral. He rarely carries it in his body

the way Ryan does, obvious and embarrassing. Shane's brain is an anxiety torment palace; Ryan, for all that he hates how transparent it is, can at least be dispelled with a good workout.

"Ooooh, sweet digs," Shane coos when they enter. He raises his eyebrows at the single bed. "How come haunted places always only have the one bed? Ghosts are perverts."

The ghost that had coalesced in the lobby and followed them up starts taking a firmer shape, leaning into Shane like it could sink into him. Ryan has never seen a possession actually happen, and he doesn't want to start with Shane, so he grabs Shane's wrist and drags him down to be side-by-side on the bed.

After a millisecond of hesitation, Shane goes. His eyes look a little startled, but he lets Ryan say: "Look, plenty of room. It's not ghosts' fault you're a fucking sasquatch."

"I'm a lot of leg," Shane agrees serenely. "More leg than statistically average for visitors of haunted establishments."

He huffs out a laugh. Ryan realizes that he is still holding Shane's wrist and let's go quickly enough that Shane rolls his head to look at him, eyebrows raised.

"What's wrong?"

Stop being so unruffled, Ryan thinks, not for the first time, not for the last.

The ghost sends him an impression of a man in 1920s clothing. Ryan sighs; he's not gonna be able to help this ghost, which means he won't go away. It's gonna be impression central all weekend, while Ryan is trying to *work*.

"I hate losing things," Ryan says, to the ghost but looking at Shane. Shane frowns, a little bewildered. "But sometimes you just gotta let go of stuff, once it's gone."

Shane blinks. He doesn't say anything for a second, then reaches out to kind of pat Ryan's shoulder. "What did you lose?" he asks, cocking his head to the side.

The ghost sends an irritated impression of a middle finger.

Ryan sighs. "My keys," he lies, and pushes himself up. "Come on, let's

get the room ready for filming.”

“We’re gonna snuggle,” Shane is saying to the camera. They’re filming the intro, and being back in Illinois has gotten into Shane’s, like, *blood* —he’s been in an almost giddy mood since they landed, and it’s bleeding into filming.

“I’m not snuggling with you, dude,” Ryan tells him, glancing anxiously at the camera and forcing himself to laugh.

Shane shakes his head with exaggerated sadness. “When will you let yourself be loved, Ryan? Maybe that’s what makes the ghosts into ghosts. They didn’t have enough love to ease their way into the afterlife.” He huffs out a long wheeze: “They didn’t use enough love lube.”

Ryan makes a face directly to camera. “I’m — what the fuck? Dude, what is *wrong* with you?”

Shane is still laughing at his own joke. He waves a hand. “Sorry, sorry,” he says. “What were you saying about murdered children?”

“Well *now* it feels kind of disrespectful,” Ryan mutters, chancing a glance at the ghost behind Shane, which is giving off the distinct vibe of someone with their arms crossed, tapping their foot. “I don’t wanna talk about dead kids with the words *love lube* rattling around in my brain.”

TJ pokes his head around the back of the camera. “I think we probably have enough,” he says. “Maybe just give me some stuff we can use as the wrap-up.”

Shane snaps his fingers. “Let’s hunt some ghosts!” he cries, over-affected and grinning like a psychopath.

“I’m never bringing you to Illinois again,” Ryan tells him.

The walk-through goes pretty smoothly, all things considered, but the Cucumber Water Ghost will *not* leave them alone. Ryan’s never had one that’s been this insistent, or this clear; the longer it sticks next to Shane, the more obvious its outline becomes, almost person-shaped.

It keeps sending Ryan impressions of that 1920s man and then moving closer to Shane; Ryan has been trying to put himself between it and Shane all night, and he knows it's going to look obvious and weird on camera, the way he keeps grabbing Shane's arm and dragging him into new space.

Shane hasn't said anything about it, though, just keeps glancing curiously at him.

"Let's do our solo lockups," Shane suggests, and Ryan hesitates.

It's ... he doesn't like the idea of Shane being without him, of the ghost having time to — *slip in*.

"I'll go first," he volunteers. "Any ghosts in here had better *come with me*, because we have to talk. I'm serious, asshole. Get in the bathroom."

Shane blinks at him. "Woah-oah," he hums. "Listen to you, taunting ghosts like a regular skeptic."

"I'm talking to them because I know they can hear me," Ryan snaps. He glares at the space over Shane's shoulder. "On the count of three I want you in that bathroom or I swear to God."

Shane lowers his camera. He's looking at Ryan in a way that makes Ryan very sure he's going to want to talk about it later, which — whatever, that's Later Ryan's problem. Right Now Ryan has to make sure his stupid best friend doesn't get possessed by a ghost and go hunting for some 1920s gangster, or whatever.

He goes into the bathroom and closes the door; the ghost, thank fuck, follows. Ryan glares at the space where the blackness of the room seems a little blacker, a little more liquid.

"What the fuck," he hisses, turning off his camera. "What are you doing? Leave Shane alone."

The ghost sends him an impression of the 1920s guy again, but this time he's—

Oh.

He's kissing somebody, a male somebody, and then it morphs into the two of them on the ground, riddled with bullets. The vision is wrapped in such soft hurt, such lost tenderness, that Ryan has to sit

down.

“Look,” he manages after a second, swallowing the lump in his throat, “I’m — fuck, I’m really sorry, that’s — look, that — ”

He gets the vision again. The face of one of the dead guys is up close now. There’s blood on the corner of his mouth, but his eyes are open. They’re soft, sleepy, wrinkled. His hair is a rumpled mess, his jaw a sharp angle, his mouth —

“Shane,” Ryan says out loud, startled.

“Yeah, buddy?” Shane calls from the other side of the door.

The ghost leans in to Ryan. This time the image is of the other dead guy, and Ryan already knows what he’s going to see when he looks at it, is cold and scared and terribly unsurprised when it’s his own wide eyes, blank and empty and staring up at him.

“Nope!” Ryan says, pushing past the ghost and through the door and past Shane and TJ and everybody, out the hotel room and down the hall. “Nope, nope, nope, fuck this. Fuck thiiiiiiiiis.”

Shane’s voice has a laugh in it as he calls out, “Ryan!” His footsteps follow, but Ryan doesn’t turn around. He’s going to go downstairs and check out and they’re going to go home and never talk about this again, Ryan’s never going to think about it, Ryan’s going to dive into another pile of bricks and stop seeing ghosts. He’s going to put Mr. Whiskers up for adoption. He’s out. He’s *out*.

Shane catches him at the elevators. It’s just him; the rest of the crew stayed behind.

“Hey,” he gets out, camera still running in his hand. “What the hell, man, what did you see? You okay?”

Ryan looks at him and for a second his face overlaps with the other one, the one on the floor, the one with blood on it. Without thinking about it, Ryan raises his hand to the corner of Shane’s mouth to wipe it off, but of course it’s just in his head, and now he’s just caressing Shane’s face. On camera.

He pulls his hand down and it tightens automatically into a fist. Shane’s eyes are wide as he peers at him, and it doesn’t seem like he’s moving, or maybe even breathing.

"I saw -- "

Ryan glances down at the camera and swallows. He's going to have to edit all this out. His camera still isn't turned on. He doesn't know how he's going to explain any of this.

"I don't know how to explain it," he decides finally. Shane still hasn't moved. "I felt really bad, man. I just got -- dizzy, I felt -- it's like there was something in there with me, and it wanted -- fuck, I can't -- it wanted to tell me something, and I saw -- I don't know how to -- Shane, fuck, it was really fucking -- bad. I'm freaking the fuck out."

His voice is shaking, and he knows it, but he can't seem to get it under control. He can feel his shoulders hunching up, knows his eyes are wide in the round way they get when he's scared. He flexes his hands and shifts his weight, just wanting to move enough to work the energy out.

The ghost didn't follow him out, but he can feel a wave of -- kind of apologetic sheepishness in the hallway.

Yeah, fuck you, man! Ryan thinks. *You should be sorry! That was fucked up!*

Shane steps in close, bringing both his hands up to Ryan's shoulders. It feels -- settling, like putting on a thundershirt or something. Ryan tries not to lean into it and fails completely. "Hey," Shane says, his voice low. "Breathe, Ry. It's okay. What did you see?"

Ryan imagines it, for a second: just telling Shane the truth, that he can see ghosts, that they talk to him, that his cat likes Taco Bell. He imagines telling Shane that he's pretty sure the ghost thinks Shane is, like, his reincarnated self. That he's pretty sure the ghost thinks *Ryan* is his reincarnated -- what -- boyfriend? Were there boyfriends in the 1920s? Whatever. Cucumber Water Ghost wasn't specific about the exact delineations of their relationship but it was pretty -- it was pretty fucking clear what the general outline was.

He'll think you're crazy, Ryan reminds himself, closing his eyes. *He'll think you're totally insane.*

Ryan shakes his head. "No, nothing," he lies. "It's fine. I probably just -- freaked myself out. You know how I get."

He takes a step back, out of Shane's space, and manages a smile. Shane doesn't drop his hands for a couple seconds, then gives Ryan a

squeeze and relinquishes his hold. He looks -- Ryan doesn't know. Shane is hard to read. He's either laughing or he's not laughing, and it's -- obviously he has other, different emotions but Ryan is too scared to look long enough to find them. He's too scared to be obvious.

"Do you want to call it quits?" Shane asks, voice on the edge of gentle, but also like he's willing to follow it up with a joke, if Ryan wants to play it off.

The air behind Ryan shifts, sharpening into the clearest outline yet, and even without looking Ryan can see it has Shane's face. The impression he gets is sorry, is don't-be-mad, is don't-be-scared, is please-please-please-don't-go.

Ryan takes a deep breath. The two Shanes are watching him. If he was smart, he'd say yes, pack his things, and go. Ghosts aren't his job, they don't pay him, it's just a weird fluke that he can even see them.

But this one looks --

Fuck, it looks like *Shane*, and it's asking like Shane would ask, if Shane would ever ask, if Shane -- if Shane ever said *stay*.

Not that Ryan ... not that ...

He grinds the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Fuck," he grumbles. "Fuck, shit, fuck. Fine. Yes. Let's stay. Don't -- no more solo shit though, all right?"

Shane ducks his head, pulling Ryan's hands from his face so their eyes can meet. He looks serious as he nods. "Okay," he agrees. "I'll be with you the whole time, buddy. Goulboys ride or die."

The ghost sends him an image of 1920s Shane and Ryan hugging, the impression caked in joy and relief, and Ryan manages a grin for Shane. "Ride or die," he echoes, and brings his camera up to his face.

"But not die," he tells the ghost sternly, but into camera, as if he were talking directly to the viewers. "Riding only."

There's a beat. Shane is not looking at him as they walk back to the hotel room, his lips rolled inward to hide a smile. "Shut the fuck up, Shane."

"I didn't say anything."

“I could see you thinking it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, man. I’m thinking about deep dish pizza. We’re right near Lou Malnati’s, I think. We could get some for dinner, before we settle down for the night.”

Ryan narrows his eyes at him, trying to see whether the lie is obvious. But Shane’s features are schooled, and he looks unruffled. Shane always looks unruffled. Ryan wants to -- Ryan either wants to get his own shit together or take Shane’s apart, and it doesn’t seem like he’s going to be getting it together any time soon.

“Maybe -- maybe we can snuggle, a little,” he says, not sure exactly where it comes from. “Just, you know. So that if the ghosts come I can use you as a human shield.”

Shane trips.

He doesn’t go down, catches himself on the wall and keeps walking, but Ryan can see the tiniest flush behind his ears. Something sparks through him, lightning-fast and bright. He can’t look away, not even when it gets obvious, not even when he knows that Shane has noticed.

Shane hunches a little obscuring the back of his neck, and laughs. “You just want me for my body,” he jokes, then puts his key in the door and pushes it open before Ryan can answer.

--

They shoot for a few more minutes, Ryan putting on a bit of a performance about how he’d gotten a bad feeling, how he’d felt dizzy and sick and his camera had mysteriously turned off.

“Did you charge it?” Shane asks laconically, lounging in the desk chair while TJ and Mark film them.

“Yes I fucking *charged it*,” Ryan says. “It turned off totally on its own, and then once I got back into the hallway it magically turned back on. That doesn’t freak you out?”

Shane shrugs. “No,” he says. “Technology is weird. It malfunctions, like, half the time. Give us a bigger tech budget, BuzzFeed.”

Ryan laughs, despite himself. “Whatever, man. A ghost turned my fucking camera off. Just because you don’t want to believe hard evidence--”

“Hard evidence! What hard evidence?! Did you see the ghost? Did you see it flick the camera to off so it could have a private moment? Maybe the ghost doesn’t like being filmed while it pees.”

Yes, I saw the ghost, and he looks like you, Ryan almost says, but wisely keeps his mouth shut. Instead, he rolls his eyes. “Maybe he did. I wouldn’t want to be filmed while I pee.”

“Do you think ghosts have to urinate?” Shane muses, voice switching from combative to curious. “Like -- do they eat ghost food? Do they have to ghost shit?”

“I don’t -- what?” Ryan asks, laughing. “No! Ghosts are *energy*, I’ve *told you* -- ”

“You *think* ghosts are energy, but you have no proof of them either way so it’s just as plausible that they’re just like us except we can’t see them.”

“Aha! Did you catch that? It’s on camera. Roll the tape. You heard it here first, Shaniacs: Shane said ghosts are plausible.”

“No, I -- no, what I said was -- ”

“Fuck you, it’s on record. You said it.”

“I said it was *as plausible as your theory*, which doesn’t mean that *your* theory is plausible.”

Ryan rolls his eyes. “Whatever. When we put this together later, you’ll see that my camera mysteriously turns off, and -- and I’m sure tonight there will be a bunch of awful shit, and we shouldn’t be staying, but I’m an asshole who for some damn reason doesn’t know what’s good for me, so.”

“If you get scared, you can always pull a Sallie House,” Shane teases.

“You think I won’t?” Ryan asks, shrugging exaggeratedly. “I’m not fucking with demons. If a demon shows up, I’m out, I don’t give a fuck what they say in the Youtube comments.”

Mark sits up. “I think that’s good,” he says. “We should set up the cameras for tonight, and then do you guys wanna grab some dinner?”

“I heard the bar in the basement of the Drake is haunted,” TJ suggests with a grin. “By like, a hot girl in a red dress.”

“Guys, be nice to Ryan, he’s been through a lot tonight,” Shane tells them with overwrought kindness. “I don’t think he can handle a hot ghost mistress. Let’s just take him out for some pizza.”

“Fuck you, man, you know I’m lactose intolerant,” Mark says. “Whatever. You guys go get pizza, TJ and I will socialize with the ghosts at the Drake. We’ll reconvene in the morning.”

Ryan does his best not to turn to look at where the Cucumber Water Ghost is hovering, hunched over by the window. He doesn’t know why this one is more clearly outlined than any of the others, why this one looks like a person and not just a shift in space.

Maybe it’s -- Shane? Maybe it’s that their faces are the same. Ryan read somewhere that everyone on earth has a doppelganger somewhere, so it’s not like ... it’s not like Shane *is* the reincarnation of this ghost. Ryan doesn’t even know if he *believes* in reincarnation. Yeah, it’s weird that Ryan also looks like the Cucumber Water Ghost’s boyfriend, but -- maybe it wasn’t as close a resemblance as Ryan initially thought. He’s got a pretty specific ethnic heritage; it seems really unlikely that some other half-Japanese, three-eighths Mexican was hanging out in Chicago in 1920. Maybe the Cucumber Water Ghost is just, like, kind of racist and thinks they look --

Ryan gets hit with another image, himself, so *clearly* himself, laughing in a pool of sunlight by the window.

“Fuck, *okay*, I get it, Jesus, calm down,” he says without thinking. The ghost sends him a wave of irritation. “Uh,” he adds, realizing that TJ and Mark and Shane are all looking at him. “I get ... that ... pizza’s not your thing.”

“I’m ... literally allergic to it,” Mark reminds him, slowly. “What the fuck?”

“No, yeah, sorry. Of course. Lactose intolerance is -- a real problem. Sorry, man, I’m just -- fuck, I’m really tired. That ghost thing kind of got to me.”

Mark pats his shoulder sympathetically, but TJ just laughs. “All right, man. Try to pull it together for the camera, or at least lose your shit in a way that I can make look funny later. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Ryan waves them away, flopping back on the bed and flinging his arm over his eyes. When they’re gone, he can *hear* Shane looking at him. He doesn’t open his eyes, just wills Shane to let it go, and eventually

he hears Shane dig into his bag and then go to the bathroom. The shower turns on.

Ryan sits up. “*Pull it together*,” he hisses at the ghost. “Stop making me look like a crazy person!”

The ghost comes to stand at the edge of the bed. He looks almost corporeal now, as tall as Shane, as spindly. He’s dressed like something out of a 1920s gangster movie, down to the suspenders and the stupid fedora. *Shane “Legs” Madej*, Ryan thinks, somewhat hysterically.

“Look, what do you want from me?”

The ghost opens his mouth. He’s talking, but Ryan can’t hear him. He looks visibly frustrated, and Ryan realizes that he’s more -- expressive than Shane is. His emotions are right there, on his face; none of Shane’s placid fronting. He leans forward, despite himself, just watching the feelings flit across Ghost Shane’s face; he feels hungry, starving, eating up every twitch.

The door opens, and Shane walks out. He walks right into the ghost.

He stops. Twitches. Turns to look at Ryan with his eyes widened in surprise.

“Shit,” Ryan says.

--

They just look at each other, for a second, Ryan’s heart hammering in his throat. Then Shane -- Ghost Shane? -- Possessed Alive Shane? -- lunges forward, grabbing Ryan’s wrist.

“Okay, easy, chill out chill out chill out,” Ryan chants. *SPOOKY STUFF*, his brain screams. *SPOOKY FUCKING STUFF, RYAN!!!!* “It’s fine, you’re fine, please get out of my friend but you’re fine, don’t freak out. Are you freaking out? Shane?”

“Bernard,” Shane’s body says.

“It’s Ryan, actually,” Ryan corrects, and he knows his voice is squeaking but at least he’s not screaming and running away, so. Points for growth.

“No, *I’m* Bernard,” Shane’s body says. “You’re -- you look like -- his

name was Ryō. But he went by Francis.”

“Why the fuck did he go by *Francis*?” Ryan asks without thinking. “No, that’s -- look, nevermind. Is Shane in there? Can you -- can you please get out of him?”

“You could see me,” Bernard-in-Shane muses. “No one has been able to, no one, but when you walked in, I ... if anyone could ... and then there *I* was, right next to you. But you’re not -- I thought maybe that’s why I was still here, to see, to be shown that we found each other, in a better time. In an easier time. But you’re -- ” He frowns. “Not. Are you?”

Ryan blinks. “We’re not what?”

The look Bernard gives him is so *Shane* that it hurts; it’s a face Ryan has seen every time he’s said the word *aliens*. “In love,” Bernard says.

Ryan hates the way his face contorts, hates the way his shoulders rise up on their own, the way his whole body twists like he’s trying to avoid an impact.

“No,” he says, looking away, down at his hands, down at the ugly comforter on the bed. “Uh, no, we’re just -- friends. Sorry.”

Bernard looks down at Shane’s hands. He reaches out slowly with them, tracing the edge of Ryan’s jaw. Ryan holds perfectly still, eyes wide, too terrified that if he moves he’ll break whatever spell has come over him.

Maybe this is hysteria, he thinks. Maybe he’s finally lost his fucking mind. It’s a more sensical explanation that that Shane is standing in front of him, in the V of his legs, caressing his face with a look of such tender consternation that Ryan can’t -- that he can barely look at it face on.

“I want to touch you,” Bernard says, like that’s normal, like that’s *fine*. “This body does.”

“Oh -- uh,” Ryan stutters, “thank you? The thing is. You’re -- I’m not Francis. Ryō. Whatever. And -- and you’re ... not Shane, so -- it would be -- it’s. I don’t think that’s ... a great idea.”

“God,” breathes Bernard, “you look *just the same*. You even sound like him. You stutter the same way. Your eyes -- you -- ”

He leans down, closer and closer and closer, hand still on Ryan's cheek, and Ryan's brain screams, *MOVE, MY GOOD BUDDY, MOVE MOVE MOVE*, but his body doesn't get the memo. He's frozen, watching Shane bend down, Shane's eyes go sharp and hungry, Shane's mouth widen as his head tilts.

Shane's going to kiss me, Ryan realizes, and then, *no*, *Shane's body is going to kiss me*, and then, to his own surprise: *I don't want Shane's body to kiss me unless his brain is in on it* --

Shane's eyes get wide, Bernard says, "Fuck, wait --" and then it's like Ryan is seeing double, Bernard spilling out of Shane and disappearing with a *pop!* until it's just Shane, frozen above Ryan on the bed, his hand tangled in the back of Ryan's hair, their mouths close enough that Ryan can feel him breathing, but of them staring at each other in absolute silence.

"I can explain," Ryan says, who can't.

Shane's face does something Ryan's never seen it do before, and then he pulls away so suddenly that Ryan loses his balance and topples backward. He takes several enormous steps backward, not saying anything, just -- totally frozen, staring at Ryan, and looking around the room as if -- as if he's seen a --

Ryan, who has never had great control over his own mouth, and just okay comedic timing, says, "So -- that feels pretty irrefutable, evidence-wise."

"Very sincerely, Ryan," Shane says, his voice shaking, "what the *fuck*."

--

"*Bricks*," Shane says, dazed, staring at Ryan, reaching out periodically to touch him at odd places -- his shoulder, the curve of his knee, the back of his hand -- like he can't help it, like he's making sure. "You fell into a pile of *bricks*? That's your -- *that's* your origin story?"

His voice gets high, panicked, thick with genuine surprise and anxiety and -- Ryan's not happy that Shane is scared, Ryan wants desperately to calm him, but he feels ... he's not *proud* of it, but it feels good to be the calm one for once, to be the one kneeling down in front of a visibly panicked Shane, making soft sounds to talk him off the ledge.

This is all on camera, Ryan remembers suddenly.

“Admittedly, it’s not -- that glamorous,” Ryan says. He tries to keep his voice soft, like Shane does for him when he’s freaking out. “Hey, man. It’s okay. I know it’s -- I know. But it’s fine. He’s -- um, his name is Bernard? And he’s actually ... pretty chill, I mean, comparatively. I can’t usually talk to them like that, I usually don’t even notice that they’re possessing people until it’s too late, I’m -- fuck, man, I’m *really* shitty at being a -- a ghost whisperer, or whatever. But they’re basically harmless, most of them, and the scary ones are -- well, they’re out there but it’s ... they’re not as common, and. I don’t think Bernard has bad intentions. I think he -- ”

Ryan breaks off. He doesn’t know how to tell Shane that Bernard wants them to be in love, and Bernard wants them to be in love so that he can move on to the afterlife. Ryan doesn’t know how to tell him that he thinks it’s probably Ryan’s fault that Bernard thought that would be a possibility for them, because Ryan can’t keep -- whatever, everything he’s ever felt, off his face.

“You look like him,” he decides eventually, not meeting Shane’s eyes. “I think that’s why he’s more clear than they usually are. I think he’s -- connected to you, somehow, spiritually, I guess. I’m really ... I’m really sorry. That he scared you. That I didn’t -- I tried not to let him near you but I -- ”

“Do you always see them?” Shane interrupts. “On locations? Have you been seeing them this whole time and not -- Jesus, Ryan, have you been letting me write them off like -- this is your life and I’ve ... you’ve let me -- ”

Ryan shakes his head. “I know you can’t see them. I didn’t expect you to -- I didn’t tell you because I know it’s crazy. I know it sounds totally fucking nutballs insane. I didn’t want you to think ... I don’t know, whatever. Like I said, it’s usually not like this.”

Shane frowns. “The Sallie House?” he asks.

“Fuck the Sallie House,” Ryan says, more viciously than maybe necessary. “Fuck that place, fuck it, fuck it fuck it fuck it.”

Shane cocks his head to the side, studying Ryan’s face. “You -- you almost made it,” he points out. “You really almost made it all night, even with -- even with *real fucking ghosts*, Jesus Christ, Ryan, why would you -- why the fuck do you do this show?”

Ryan looks away. It’s embarrassing to admit it. It’s embarrassing to say it to Shane, who doesn’t have Ryan’s need to be liked, who got to

Buzzfeed and picked a handful of people he himself would like and didn't care what anybody else thought. Ryan doesn't know why he got picked, by Shane.

"They -- they need me, kind of," he mumbles, after a minute. "I can't always help them, but. Sometimes I can."

When he looks back, Shane is just ... looking at him, face soft, face *open*, his emotions right there. *Right* there, in a way they never are. Ryan's seen more of Shane's emotions in the last fifteen minutes than he has in four years of friendship.

"You're brave," Shane tells him, voice soft. "Ryan, that's -- really fucking admirable, man."

Ryan darts his eyes away and coughs a laugh. "Whatever," he disassembles. "It's not a big deal. I mean, his name is *Bernard*, what's so scary about a Bernard?"

Shane shakes his head, but doesn't say anything else, just hums thoughtfully. He looks at his hands, then at Ryan's hands, and then up at the ceiling. "So -- how come he wanted to kiss you?"

Ryan winces. "I'm -- a very kissable person," he deflects.

"I know," Shane agrees amiably. "Is that a normal thing, then? With ghosts? Are you like ghost sexual catnip?"

Ryan pushes his hand through his hair and falls back so that he's no longer kneeling in front of Shane, sitting instead on his butt on the floor. He leans his hands on his knees and lets his head fall forward. "No," he says dryly. "Most ghosts don't try to make out with me. I told you, it's usually not like this. Most of the time I don't even realize it was a ghost until like, way later. I only just figured out how to talk to the ghost in my cat, and that's because all he ever does is ask me for Taco Bell."

Shane barks out a laugh, and it's like the tension bleeds out of the room: Shane flops back at the bed, staring at the ceiling, and Ryan lets himself look at the long stretch of him, the long complicated mess of him, every inch of the way Ryan's brain sparks and unsettles every time he tries to think about it, tries to untangle it so that he knows what box Shane belongs in.

You're not. Not what? In love.

No, they're -- Ryan doesn't fucking know what they are. He sees the way that Shane ... accommodates him, is gentle with him, the way that Ryan is obviously the *favorite*. He knows Shane looks at him, sometimes. He's read the BFU fanfiction; he knows that there's chemistry. He knows that there are gifs of Shane's eyes going soft, of Shane saying with a slurry, drunk mouth, *Ryan Ryan Ryan* and then winking.

But it's not as simple as that, Ryan doesn't think; *Shane's* not as simple as that, because he's so hard to read, because his brain is such a tangled nightmare and he never airs any of it out until he's untied the knot. Ryan knows that any time Shane talks to him about a problem, he's already solved it. If he hasn't ... if he hasn't said anything to Ryan then he must not be sure, or he is sure and he's decided against.

And that's fine. Ryan -- Ryan hasn't poked at his own feelings because he doesn't want to deal with the bruises of them, doesn't want to open a can of worms he can't put back. Ryan feels things visibly, forcefully, immediately; if he starts an emotion he has to finish it, and if Shane ... if he doesn't want -- Ryan can't let himself decide what he wants, this time, unless he knows he's going to get it.

God, he hates being a person.

"Then it's just me," Shane guesses, voice easier than it's been for the rest of the conversation. "Or, I mean. It's just Ghost Lookalike Shane."

"It's just Ghost Lookalike Shane what?"

"Who wants to kiss you."

Ryan shrugs. "I guess," he says. "He thinks -- uh. He thinks I look like his boyfriend. From ... when he was alive."

Shane doesn't say anything for a long, unbearable few moments.

"So, what, if he kisses you, he'll -- move on? Or whatever?"

"I don't fucking know, man."

Ryan stretches out on the floor. He doesn't want to look at Shane anymore. He wants to go home and eat tacos with his cat.

"Is he still here? Bernard?"

"No. I think you -- when you kicked him out, or whatever, I think it

like, scared him.”

Shane sits up and peers down at Ryan, squinting. “Okay,” he says. “Then let’s get some pizza. Being possessed really takes it out of a guy.”

Ryan laughs. He climbs to his feet and holds out his hand to Shane, thinking that maybe it’ll be fine, actually. Maybe Bernard will be gone for good. Maybe this doesn’t have to mean that anything is different, or changed, or broken. Maybe they’re just gonna keep on being just two bros with a TV show where they hunt ghosts, but now Shane won’t be such an asshole about it.

It’s not gonna be weird.

--

It’s weird.

It’s so fucking weird.

They’re sitting across from each other at a Gino’s East, a deep dish pizza between them, four empty bottles of beer by the edge of the table. It had taken almost an hour for the pizza to come out, and they’d just sat there the whole time, not looking at each other, drinking steadily.

It feels --

The problem is, it feels like a date. It feels like a date because an hour ago, Shane’s hands were tangled in Ryan’s hair and his mouth was saying *I want to touch you, this body wants to touch you*, and logically, Ryan knows that it wasn’t really *Shane* saying it, metaphysically speaking, but it was Shane’s mouth and Shane’s hand and Shane’s -- breath.

It feels like a date because Shane keeps sending him these ... *glances*, when he thinks Ryan isn’t looking. It feels like a date because Shane’s knee is bumped up against Ryan’s and hasn’t moved. It feels like a date because Shane -- is *nervous*.

Ryan closes his eyes and gets a vision of himself kneeling in front of Shane, Shane’s hands fluttering against him distractedly, like he needed grounding, like Ryan was an anchor for him.

When he opens his eyes, Bernard is sitting next to Shane in the stall,

beaming.

“Shut the fuck up, Bernard,” Ryan says, and Shane startles. He looks at the spot next to him, but clearly can’t see anything. Ryan gestures tiredly. “He’s right there. He’s -- being smug.”

“About what?”

My feelings, Ryan thinks.

“I don’t know. Whatever. Ghost stuff.”

Shane raises his eyebrows. “Very illuminating, Ryan, thank you. He’s being smug about ghost stuff.”

Ryan shrugs.

Shane takes a bite of pizza and chews, slow and thoughtful. Bernard’s mouth is moving, but Ryan still can’t hear him in this form, so he chooses to pin his eyes on Shane and determinedly ignore the images of him and Shane kissing across the table that Bernard keeps throwing at him.

Huh. Ghosts really are perverts, he thinks.

“I’d have believed you, you know,” Shane says abruptly, swallowing. “About seeing ghosts. If you’d told me.”

Ryan levels him with a look. “*Bullshit* you would have believed me,” he laughs. “You’ve never believed me about anything before!”

“I don’t believe you when you say sounds that aren’t voices are voices,” Shane admits, agreeably enough. “But if you’d -- if you’d said, ‘Shane, listen, I see ghosts, and I know you can’t, but I can,’ I’d have ... I’d have believed you.”

Ryan frowns. “But you couldn’t have seen it,” he says. “There’s no evidence. I can’t prove it.”

Shane rolls his eyes. He nudges Ryan’s knee with his own. “*You’re* my evidence, Bergara,” he says, perfectly calm. “I can see *you*, and I trust *you*, and you saying that you see ghosts means that you see ghosts, and that they’re real. That’s all you ever had to say.”

Ryan’s throat goes dry. “That’s not very scientific,” he manages, after a moment. “They’re going to take your skeptical asshole certification away.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “*Ryan*,” he scolds, soft.

Ryan can’t look at him. “Thanks,” he croaks out. “I’m — that means a lot.”

Bernard sends a vision of himself and Francis, sitting next to each other on a pier. Francis’s head is on Bernard’s shoulder. Their hands are clasped together, and Francis is rubbing circles on the back of Bernard’s hand with his thumb. The image flickers and becomes -- Ryan and Shane, in their own clothes. Ryan’s chest twists. He feels his hand reaching out without thinking, landing on Shane’s wrist almost of its own accord.

“Goddamnit, Bernard,” Ryan snaps. “Come on, man. I told you to chill the fuck out.”

Shane looks down at where Ryann is touching him, then at Ryan, then over at the space next to him.

Oh no, Ryan thinks, watching it click.

“Oh,” Shane realizes. “*Oh*.”

Ryan moves to pull his hand back, but Shane catches it with his own. He tangles their fingers, staring determinedly down at them. He’s frowning, but he doesn’t look *blank* the way he does when he’s upset.

“Shane, man,” Ryan murmurs. “What—”

“This is it, right? This is what he wants?”

Ryan hesitates. Bernard is looking back and forth between them, gesturing frantically, but Ryan doesn’t know what he’s trying to get at.

“He — it didn’t end well. For them. For him and — Ryō. He, uh, went by Francis.”

“Why’d he go by Francis?” Shane asks curiously, lifting their fingers up so he can toy with them. Something electric follows everywhere his fingers touch, Ryan’s hand twitching involuntarily.

The air feels — heavy, like it had back in the hotel room.

“I dunno. Racism, probably.”

Shane huffs out a laugh. “Right. 1920s. I forgot.”

“Yeah, thank God we cured racism in 1920,” Ryan mutters dryly. He turns his hand over so that Shane can trace an s in his palm. He thinks Shane might be writing his name.

Ryan swallows thickly. “I think — Shane, we don’t have to ... I can’t always help them. I just can’t, sometimes. You can’t even see him, so it’s not like — I know this is so fuckin weird, man.”

Shane waits. He’s good at waiting for Ryan to talk himself through all the wrong ways of saying what he’s trying to get across.

Ryan closes his eyes and tries to think, tries to put it in order.

The thing is — the thing is, Ryan knows that Shane would do just about anything for Ryan, but he hasn’t offered this. And he’s so quiet and so calm and so unflappable that people think he’s filled with all this still water, but Ryan knows better, and he doesn’t want —

“I don’t want you to put yourself through something,” he says slowly. “I mean — not just because I don’t want to — you know, be something that’s just *gotten through*, or whatever, but — ”

You look but you’ve never done anything about it and I’m trying to respect that, Ryan thinks, but can’t make his mouth say.

“You don’t owe Bernard shit,” he says instead. “Neither do I. Don’t — your friendship means more to me than his, like — eternal rest, or whatever.”

Bernard slaps his hand to his forehead. Ryan is overwhelmed with Bernard’s desire to shove his face directly into the pizza.

“Shut the *fuck up*, Bernard,” Ryan snaps.

Shane is grinning at him.

“Okay,” he says.

“Okay? Okay what?”

“Okay, I won’t do anything I don’t want to do,” Shane promises, and doesn’t let go of Ryan’s hand.

—

They go for a walk by the lake. It’s pretty. Ryan’s been to Chicago before, but he spent most of it extremely drunk in a series of

increasingly hazy bars, and hadn't devoted a ton of time to sightseeing. They're walking along a boulevard, down toward Navy Pier. Shane is still holding his hand, and keeps listing into Ryan's side.

Ryan doesn't ... quite understand what is going on, but he's decided to err on the side of just rolling with it.

"...used to be a naval academy, hence the name," Shane is saying. "There's a bunch of crashed planes on the water around here, too. They've cleared a bunch out but not all of it. Also the ferris wheel is pretty new — it's not as big as the original but it's a lot less likely to collapse on you, so you win some you lose some I guess — "

Bernard is beaming at them. He's been thrilled since they left Gino's, popping in and out of Ryan's vision like his joy was too much to contain.

"Is this the Shane Madej first date special?" Ryan asks, laughter suddenly bubbling up. "Romantic walk, a lot of boring history — "

"*Boring history?*"

" — judgmental notes on the infrastructure of local tourist attractions — "

"If I'm not honest, they can't improve."

"*Constructive Criticism: The Shane Madej Story.*"

Shane laughs. "Hm, sounds critically acclaimed. Sounds like an absolute best selling smash. A Pulitzer-winning work of art almost as worthy as the *Hotdaga*."

"Well, there goes my boner," Ryan laughs, before he can think about it, and then remembers that Shane is holding his hand, that they're leaning against each other, that the sky is bright and spackled with stars. "...Uh," he says. "Sorry — that's — I kind of, like, forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"That we're ... that ... come on, dude. Don't make me say it."

Shane steps in close. He's grinning, his eyes wrinkled, his face calm and sure. He's over the ghosts thing, Ryan guesses; he's already internalized it, already reorganized. And now he's looking at Ryan with a kind of earnestness that Ryan's not prepared for, that's -- new.

Really new.

Like, four hours old.

Ryan closes his eyes. Shane before Bernard hadn't wanted Ryan badly enough to take the risk for him. Maybe — maybe possession leaves a hangover. Maybe Bernard is leaking.

Maybe Shane's whole worldview just shifted and he's not thinking clearly, and Ryan is the thing that's steady, the thing he can touch and know is still real and solid and basically normal.

Ryan *wants*. He's been so good about not wanting, about not letting himself think about it enough to settle, but there it is: a hard knot in his belly, the very same feeling he'd had when he'd been waiting to see if they'd get a second season of BFU, when he'd been standing in front of Shane waiting for him to say whether or not he'd co-host, when he'd submitted his application to BuzzFeed and was waiting for an interview.

Ryan has always wanted things so badly that it bowls him over, sometimes, but Shane's not like that. Shane is steady, and methodical, and deliberate. He chews things over so much they become liquid.

He doesn't change his mind in four hours, not about things that matter.

Shane is smiling, Shane is looking down at him, Shane's face is soft and warm and so fucking -- *beloved*, shit.

Ryan can't -- Ryan *can't*.

"Shane, man," he forces himself to say, looking around with exaggerated confusion. "Hey, look at that. Bernard's gone. We did it. Good work, buddy."

Shane pulls back, expression going shuttered and smooth.

Behind Shane's shoulder, Bernard puts both his middle fingers up.

--

"Did you get any good footage?" TJ asks in the morning, all of them down at the free continental breakfast. Ryan and Shane aren't really talking to one another. No one has mentioned it yet. Ryan's not sure if they've noticed, or if it just seems like sleepiness.

It's going to be a shitty episode, he can already tell. They'd gotten back to the hotel and gone to bed immediately, not looking at each other, not talking much about the room. Shane had gamely attempted a few calls to the ghosts, but Ryan hadn't been able to laugh, had been working too hard to ignore Bernard, who was standing next to Shane and screaming silently.

Maybe this is how the scary ones get made, Ryan had thought, feeling guilty.

Needless to say, they hadn't snuggled.

"Not unless you count Ryan's extraordinary snoring," Shane jokes. "What about you guys? Hear anything spooooooky?"

Ryan closes his eyes and gets through breakfast and checkout, helps pack up the taxi while TJ does a last minute equipment count. Bernard hovers by the car, his eyes boring holes in Ryan's head. Ryan can feel his panic, can barely see through all the impressions and visions he's sending.

He grits his teeth. *Fuck ghosts*, he thinks. He's never really figured out whether ghosts can hear him. *When I get home I am exorcizing Mr. Goddamn Whiskers*.

Shane gets in the front of the taxi. TJ and Mark pile in the back. Ryan puts his hand on the door and starts hauling himself in.

He gets about halfway in when he feels himself stop.

Fuck.

Fuck.

"I have to stay a couple days," he says miserably, dropping back out of the car and shoving his hands into his pockets. He doesn't look at Shane. "I'm -- I've got some vacation days, and, uh. There's some stuff I want to see. Email me the video files, I'll work on it while I'm here, okay?"

He shuts the taxi doors, turns around, and walks back into the hotel. He doesn't let himself look back.

--

Right: Ryan's gonna date a ghost.

Bernard seems dubious, but that's fine. Ryan's also dubious, but it's worth a try, right? They're going to go out, and find someone tall and vaguely Midwestern, and Bernard's going to possess him, and they're going to go on a date. And then Bernard will be able to move on.

It'll be fine. It'll be -- basically the same.

Bernard isn't impressed, but fuck Bernard. Bernard is ruining Ryan's life, so he can take the bone Ryan is throwing him and shut up.

Ryan showers, and puts on the only button-down he brought over some jeans. He only brought sneakers, but that's fine; it's 2018, and Bernard can deal with some casual shoes. It's not like they're going to eat at Alinea or anything; Ryan's on a Bergara budget, not a *Worth It* budget.

Also, Bernard doesn't even know what food is like these days, so maybe he won't notice that Ryan's not really going all out.

He goes to the River Walk, because it's nice out and a lot of people seem to be there, and then he takes a seat by the river and lets Bernard find his body for the evening. He feels a little bad about it, but fuck it, Ryan doesn't know these people, and probably they'll just think they got blackout drunk or something.

"This is weird," a voice says over his shoulder, and Ryan turns. He knows it's not going to be Shane but there's a swoop of disappointment in his stomach anyway when it isn't.

It's just ... some guy. Kind of anticlimactic, really -- just a regular-looking guy. He's not even all that much taller than Ryan. Just ... vague, and white.

"Bernard?"

"You sure bungled that one, big timer," Bernard says, though there isn't much heat in his voice. "You totally panicked."

"I didn't *panic*," Ryan protests, spluttering. "Sorry my friendship with Shane is more important to me than you getting your -- *rocks off*, or whatever, on your super sad self-insert pornography fanfiction."

Bernard raises his eyebrows. Ryan winces. "Okay. That was ... way harsher than I meant it to be, maybe. Sorry, dude." He rubs at his forehead and then drops his head to hang between his shoulders. "You're really fucking me up here."

“Sorry.”

Ryan gets the distinct impression that Bernard is not, in fact, sorry. He takes a seat beside Ryan and they both look out at the river. It's pretty at night, boats floating down it, reflections of building lights.

They don't say anything. Ryan reaches out to take Bernard's hand, experimentally. Bernard turns it over and looks at them, and then at Ryan, and then out at the river.

“This isn't going to work, is it?” Ryan asks.

“No,” says Bernard. “It's not going to work.”

Ryan sighs. “*God*, I am the *worst* fucking psychic, it's incredible.”

Bernard laughs, leaning back against his elbows. He doesn't let go of Ryan's hand.

“You tried,” he says, and smiles a little. It's not Shane's smile, not Bernard's smile. Just some random dude wearing loafers. “I don't know that -- I don't know that it would have worked if it was Shane, either, to be fair.”

Ryan gives his hand a squeeze. It feels like everyone is looking at them, but they aren't. Ryan knows they aren't. Ryan doesn't let go of Bernard's hand as he says, “We *did* find each other. Shane and me. We -- we're not -- I know you wanted us to be like you and Francis, but even if ... even if that doesn't happen, he's my best friend. He's my -- I don't know. He's Shane. We found each other.”

Bernard smiles. “You're happy?” he asks. “You? Francis?”

He flickers in and out.

Take that, pile of bricks, Ryan thinks.

“I'm happy, Bernard,” he promises. “I'm really happy. I have almost everything I want.”

Bernard's grin splits, and he comes out of the body, his face Shane's face again, lit up. It hurts Ryan's heart, a little. Ghost Bernard leans in and presses a kiss to Ryan's forehead, and then disappears in a soft pop of light.

Ryan sleeps on the plane ride back to LA. It's a Friday, so he'll have the weekend to recover. He stops at Taco Bell on the drive back to his apartment, and Mr. Whiskers thanks him by nuzzling up against his hand, purring and sending him impressions of the thumbs up emoji and a bunch of hearts.

--

He wakes up to the sound of someone knocking on his door. He thinks maybe it's his neighbor, who he'd asked to feed Mr. Whiskers, maybe come to yell at him for extending his trip without notice.

It's not.

It's Shane.

Shane looks mad.

"Well," Ryan says, sighing, "yeah. I mean -- yeah. I guess this was inevitable." He steps aside and gestures into the apartment. "Come on in."

Shane kicks off his shoes because he knows Ryan runs a no shoes household, and something in the motion makes Ryan just ... freeze, staring at them, at the automatic gesture of it.

"I'm -- " Shane stops, thinks about it, restarts. "Bernard wasn't really gone, was he?"

"No," Ryan admits.

"Is he now?"

"Yes."

"Did you -- is he gone because you guys, like, Patrick Swayze in *Ghosted*?"

That one takes Ryan a second, but then he laughs, coming around to lean against the counter. Shane is standing by the couch, arms shoved in his pockets, not quite meeting Ryan's eyes. He still looks mad, but like it's hit him that he's here, now, not just stewing in his own brain. "No," Ryan promises. "I didn't have sex with a ghost. We just ... held hands, a little."

In his pockets, Shane's hands twitch, but he doesn't say anything, and Ryan thinks: *fuck it. One of us, at some point, has to be brave.*

"I was scared," he says, looking at Shane and waiting until Shane looks back, brow furrowed in confusion.

"Of Bernard?"

"No, not of -- not of fucking *Bernard*. I was scared of *you*. That's why I sent you away. I was scared that -- Shane, I'm not a fucking idiot, man. I edit all our videos. I see all the footage. It's ... we aren't subtle people."

Shane blinks, slow and surprised, like this had never occurred to him.

"But you never said anything," Ryan barrels on, determined to put it out there, determined to just -- be fucking *honest*, for once. "And I know how -- how *careful* you are, how much you think about everything, and I thought -- if you looked at me like that but never *did* anything, maybe it was ... maybe you'd decided not to, maybe it wasn't worth the risk, maybe -- I don't know, fuck, maybe a million things. And then Bernard -- he was in you for like, two minutes, and suddenly you're -- holding my hand, and -- and taking me on the Shane Madej First Date Special, and -- I just. I was scared. I thought it was ... Bernard's influence, or ... I don't know, like maybe you were ghost-drunk, or that you were so shook about ghosts that you weren't thinking straight, or -- "

"Ryan," Shane says.

"-- and I know it's stupid but I was trying to *protect* you, because people -- don't, they think that I'm the ... the fragile one, or whatever, just because I'm so fucking obvious, but I know you're ... I know your brain can be, whatever, hard to wrestle with, and -- and that's. That's a lot, to stake our fucking -- *careers* on -- "

"Ryan."

"-- but I know, I *know*, we'll be fine, if nothing -- if we just call it now and say it's too big a risk, I -- you're my best friend, and it'll be fine. So it's -- it's okay. If that's what you want to do. But I -- but if you don't -- that is, if you want -- "

Shane takes two big steps forward, grabs the front of Ryan's shirt, and yanks him in. Ryan's mouth snaps shut.

"Ryan," Shane says.

His face is wide open, everything played out on his face. He looks

scared and brave and amused and just -- fucking ... *ruffled*.

I did it, Ryan thinks, distantly. *I ruffled him*.

“What?”

“I think you have a problem of over-intellectualizing things.”

“... What?”

Shane laughs, and brings his free hand up to wrap around the back of Ryan’s head. He’s so fucking tall. He bends down, bringing their faces close. “Thank you for trying to protect me,” he murmurs, and nudges Ryan’s nose, a little. He looks -- so sincerely delighted, so honestly surprised by Ryan being here, and being so close. “Can I? I want to. Ryan, if you need me to say it, I’ll say it as much as I have to: I want to. Me. I do. Of my very own volition.”

Ryan, heart in his throat, nods.

Shane’s mouth presses down on his and Ryan thinks, *oh*.

He thinks, *ohhhhh*.

He thinks, *I’m the best fucking psychic in the world*.

--

“I didn’t say anything because I don’t watch the tape,” Shane murmurs later, his mouth close enough to Ryan’s that their lips brush. “I didn’t know. Ryan -- I honestly didn’t know. You can be a weirdly hard to read.”

Ryan laughs.

End Notes

AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER. eventually they exorcize mr. whiskers, and it turns out the cat doesn't like tacos. can you believe?!

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